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Lost In The Supermarket? The evolving role of popular music and popular music products in the Immersive Economy

Lost In The Supermarket? El papel en evolución de la música popular y los productos de música popular en la economía inmersiva

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Abstract

This paper looks at the evolving role of popular music, musicians and music products in contemporary consumer culture. Using a case study methodology, the paper first makes the argument that through a process of retail curation, music products are an increasingly core component in lifestyle branding, supported by Jenkins' theory of cultural convergence. In the second section of the paper, it is shown that popular music is essential to the creation of hybrid products, where consumer behaviour is not centred around lifestyle branding, but rather that of experience branding. In the final third of the chapter I present the concept of the Immersive Economy, which extends the notion of the experience economy to consider the ways in which independent brands work together to form brand meta-narratives, where consumers have a number of multifaceted yet unique brand interactions across discrete yet interrelated brands.

Palabras clave

Beatles; consumer behaviour; cultural branding; cultural convergence; hybridity; Immersive Economy; music industries; popular music; retail curation

Resumen

Este documento analiza el papel en evolución de la música popular, los músicos y los productos de música en la cultura de consumo contemporánea. Usando una metodología de estudio de caso, el documento primero argumenta que los productos musicales son un componente cada vez más importante en el estilo de vida de la marca, respaldado por la teoría de la convergencia cultural de Jenkins. En la segunda sección del documento, se muestra cómo la música popular es esencial para la creación de productos híbridos, donde el comportamiento del consumidor no se centra en el estilo de vida de la marca sino más bien en la experiencia de la marca. En el último tercio del capítulo, se presenta el concepto de la economía inmersiva, que amplía la noción de la economía de la experiencia para considerar las formas en que las marcas independientes trabajan juntas para formar meta-narrativas de marca, donde los consumidores tienen un número multifacético de interacciones con marcas interrelacionadas.

Keywords

Beatles; comportamiento del consumidor; marca cultural; convergencia cultural; hibridación; Economía inmersiva; industrias musicales; música popular

1. Urban Outfitters and Popular Music: Cultural convergence

Recently, I observed shoppers in a queue in an Urban Outfitters shop in Glasgow, Scotland. On the day of my visit, at the head of the line was a couple who appeared to be in their mid-20s. The man was wearing a flannel shirt and sporting a 'hipster' beard. The woman was wearing trendy Vans trainers. They were purchasing a Crosley turntable and an Etta James album. On observing this transaction, several questions passed through my mind: first, why would anyone buy an album, never mind a turntable, from a clothing shop? Second, why is a clothing shop selling music products at all? And third, if a clothing retailer does sell music, why is it selling vinyl exclusively (as opposed to CDs, cassette tapes or even MP3 downloads), and at that, why are they stocking albums from artists like Etta James rather than more contemporary acts and releases?

In thinking more about these questions, I visited the Urban Outfitters website. Not a regular customer of the chain, until my recent visit I had retained my longstanding perception of Urban Outfitters as 'just' a clothing store, akin to other high street multi-national fashion retailers like Gap, Benetton and H&M. Somewhat to my surprise, despite the implications of its name, Urban Outfitters is no longer, 'just' a clothing shop, instead describing itself as, 'a lifestyle retailer dedicated to inspiring customers through a unique combination of product, creativity and cultural understanding' (urbanoutfitters.com, 2017). In my visit to the Glasgow store, it became clear music and music products played a central role in helping Urban Outfitters to communicate their 'cultural understanding' of the 'lifestyle' they are selling. In physical terms, as discussed by Fulberg (2003) the music played in-store clearly helps to 'sonically brand' the 'lifestyle' Urban Outfitters seeks to promote. But beyond the 'retail soundscape' (Jankovich 2013), tangible music products also contribute both overtly and semiotically to the Urban Outfitters lifestyle. Sandwiched on a mezzanine level between floors dedicated to women's and men's fashion, the music section of the Glasgow Urban Outfitters presents a floor-to-ceiling wall display of a dizzying array of brightly coloured, 'retro-styled' Crosley turntables, exclusively. Adjacent to this display is a carefully curated selection of vinyl albums, featuring predominately older, 'classic' albums. In addition to the aforementioned Etta James, there were albums from Bob Marley, Patti Smith, the Sex Pistols and the Rolling Stones, alongside more recent artists like Craig David and Amy Winehouse. The only two contemporary albums visible within the display were the soundtrack to the second *Guardians of the Galaxy* film and Ariana Grande's most recent release, *Dangerous Woman*.

I was struck by the notion that Urban Outfitters' display and use of popular music products as popular music artefacts, is unique on the current high street retail landscape. Occupying space that is neither hi-fi/stereo retailer nor record shop, neither department store nor specialist, Urban Outfitters is, to draw on the language of their website, telling a 'music+tech story' (UrbanOutfitters.com, 2017), where the physical materiality of music – albums and turntables – are merely components within the Urban Outfitters brand narrative, rather than objects or brands with their own cultural power. In this way, Urban Outfitters is performing a kind of 'retail curation,' acting as a cultural intermediary (Negus 2002), essentialising consumers' choices and indeed their awareness of a wider range of music products to only those which, presumably, possess or are ascribed aesthetic values which mesh with those of the Urban Outfitters brand narrative.

What this process of retail curation suggests is a shift in the ways not only that consumers consume but also in the ways they now view popular culture more broadly. The physical, tangible stuff of popular culture is no longer found in discrete and segmented retail sectors: clothing shops, shoe shops, record shops, but instead, as evidenced by Urban Outfitters, presented together as part and parcel of lifestyle branding. This practice clearly has implications for the value of popular music, musicians and music products within wider cultural, creative and industrial milieux. But the focus of this paper is on how both retailers and consumers understand and harness the power of music. In no small part, Urban Outfitters is an evident illustration of Jenkins' (2006:20) compelling theory of 'Convergence Culture' where, "'affective economics'" encourages companies to transform brands into what one industry insider calls "lovemarks" and to blur the line between entertainment content and brand messages.' Whilst Urban Outfitters' lifestyle branding practice is a useful example of the changing role and value of popular music within this culturally converged consumer environment, I next turn attention to another example of an even more immersive consumer trend where music products, artefacts and narratives play an even more central role.

Image 1: Vinyl display in Glasgow Urban Outfitters, October, 2017



Source: Tessler (2017)

2. Pretty Green and Popular Music: Hybridity and the Experience Economy

Pretty Green is a UK men's fashion label and retail chain founded by Oasis frontman Liam Gallagher in 2009. The label takes its name from the title of a Jam song and seeks to, 'unite people through a love of music and fashion' (PrettyGreen.com, 2017). Whilst Urban Outfitters relies on music as one of several core components of its brand narrative, for Pretty Green, music and fashion are inherently intertwined, creating a storied music-fashion hybrid product and brand narrative. Fairly unique amongst high street clothing retailers, Pretty Green's core demographic excludes fashion's two largest consumer bases: women and young people. Indeed, the label primarily targets middle-aged men, those old enough to not only remember Oasis in their 1990s Britpop heyday but those for whom the fashion, culture and ethos of 'Cool Britannia' era continues to resonate today. Quite directly, Pretty Green allows fans of Liam Gallagher to dress just like him.

If that was the extent of the Pretty Green story, it would still be interesting but certainly not unique, as myriad pop/rock performers have their own lifestyle-inspired clothing ranges, amongst them: Jennifer Lopez, Lenny Kravitz, and Tom DeLonge and Mark Hoppe from the Skate-Punk band Blink-182 whose Attacus line, launched in 2001, was amongst the first and most successful music-based contemporary fashion brands. What makes Pretty Green an exceptional example is how fully integrated music is to the label's brand experience. The narrative begins with the clothing itself, which affords music fans the opportunity to literally and figuratively dress like a rock star. In addition to Liam Gallagher's input, other iconic rock musicians and

music industry figures have also collaborated on Pretty Green lines: Paul Weller (from the Jam), designed his own Pretty Green collection in 2011; and in 2014 the label launched a limited-edition series of T-shirts featuring images of David Bowie taken by famed music photographer Mick Rock in 1973 and used on Bowie's *Pin-Ups* album (PrettyGreen.com, 2017). Thus, by purchasing these articles of clothing, consumers are buying both the physical product and *buying into* the story behind the product, chiefly, its design provenance. Whilst it must certainly be acknowledged that there is no way of knowing if all of Pretty Green's consumers are either aware of or necessarily influenced in their purchases by the knowledge that their clothes were designed by Liam Gallagher, Paul Weller or Mick Rock, given the comparatively expensive price tags of these garments and the comparatively limited number of bricks-and-mortar shops compared to other high street chains, it can be assumed that the majority of customers who purchase Pretty Green's clothes do so out of loyalty and engagement for what the brand is seen to embody: Mod culture, Cool Britannia, and a 'rock and roll lifestyle.'

Beyond the clothing itself, the inherent product- and cultural-hybridity of the Pretty Green brand is most notably evidenced in its retail environment. Like Urban Outfitters, Pretty Green also curates a selection of brand-resonant vinyl in its shops. For instance, in celebrating Record Store Day's 10th anniversary, in April, 2017, Pretty Green shops featured albums, EPs and singles from acts whose sound, look and story mesh with the label itself, including: the Beatles, the Zombies, the Who, the Flaming Lips, Air and Primal Scream. But more significantly still, the retail shops themselves transform into venues for live music performances by up-and-coming rock acts. In February, 2015, I saw the band the Hidden Charms performing live in the Pretty Green shop in Ingram Street, Glasgow, as part of their tour of all the UK Pretty Greens. Young, white, male and handsome with a 1960s Carnaby Street style, this four-piece Garage-psych rock combo personified all that the Pretty Green brand represents. For consumers, this kind of hybrid shopping-gig environment extends the label's rock-and-roll narrative, typifying what Pine and Gilmour have termed the 'experience economy,' where consumers don't just support a brand, but are *engaged* by it, in, 'a personal, memorable way' (1999: 3). In the case of Pretty Green, consumers don't simply buy clothing that will afford them a chance to imagine a rock-star lifestyle in simulacra, but instead truly experience it through Pretty Green. Indeed, the company placed sited shops strategically, first rolling out in cities and locations significant to British music and fashion: its flagship Carnaby Street store in London, Manchester – Oasis and Gallagher's hometown, Liverpool – synonymous with the Beatles and Glasgow – where Oasis signed their first recording contract, before expanding across the UK and now internationally. In this way, consumers have the material, storied, experiential link between shopping for fashion designed by rock stars, for sale in shops which double as gig spaces, in cities that have significant musical and fashion history. Thus, the Pretty Green brand is not just communicated through curated product offerings, but experienced across multiple channels, platforms and media.

3. Findings: Brand Meta-Narratives and The Immersive Economy

This ongoing blurring of lines and the decreasing of space between creative industries sectors suggests the experience economy is driven not only by engagement with culturally resonant brands but through increasingly hybrid events. The examples of Urban Outfitters and Pretty Green afford an opportunity to understand the increasing centrality of popular music, musicians and music products to the experience economy. And these kinds of hybrid, 'music-and...' experiences are certainly not limited to retail. There are, for example, combination gig-film screening events; festivals for food and music; pop-up restaurants within live music venues; holidays and travel designed around music pilgrimages.

However, Pine and Gilmore's work, now almost 20 years old, it is limited in scope by its focus on the consumer, i.e., the person who *experiences* the experience economy. What it does not account for in today's current consumer climate is how the kinds of hybrid experiences I have described here do not necessarily exclusively occur between a brand and its consumers, but also and significantly between *multiple* brands and consumers who collectively construct a shared narrative in what I am terming the 'Immersive Economy.' If we accept that much of contemporary consumer behaviour is driven by brand engagement (c.f. Meier 2017; Holt 2004) and that much of current brand engagement is driven by the experience economy, the evidence presented within this paper has shown that the contemporary experience economy is increasingly driven through hybrid experiences. Within the wider geo-political constructs of globalisation and the neo-liberal economy, the concept of hybridity is often seen as a central theoretical pillar (c.f. Ritzer and Ryan 2004). Yet there is surprisingly little exploration of the role hybridity plays in the creation of shared brand narratives, or indeed 'brand meta-narratives.'

Specifically, what I am referring to are brand narratives constructed not just by one company, but those which are created collectively, through strategic alliances between complementary companies, each of whom foster and steward a single, correlated strand of the 'big-picture story,' but also work with to cross-

promote individual products and services tied to hybrid, multi-channel, multi-platform brand experiences. Whilst relatively uncommon as yet, there is one such example of a brand meta-narrative relevant to this discussion – that of the Beatles and their album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Originally released in 1967, *Sgt. Pepper* was an instant classic, unprecedented in its musical, aesthetic and technical achievements (c.f., Julien, 2008). In June, 2017, Apple, the Beatles' management company (unaffiliated with Apple Computer), sought to mark the album's 50th anniversary with a range of celebratory products and events. Through the Beatles' longstanding partnership with EMI Records (now owned by Universal), Apple released a weighty, newly digitally re-mastered box set of the *Sgt. Pepper* album. They also teamed with the BBC in Britain and PBS in America to air a new and exclusive documentary programmed titled *Sgt. Pepper's Musical Revolution*. Additionally, Apple worked with the City of Liverpool to host a range of *Sgt. Pepper*-themed cultural events throughout the city, including dance events, performance-art installations, a circus and murals. Apple also partnered with Pretty Green to commemorate the album's 50th anniversary with an 'exclusive collaboration...[where] each item has been inspired by actual outfits that the Beatles wore, along with the music and artwork from *Sgt. Pepper*' (PrettyGreen.com/discover/the-beatles/ 2017).

Thus, multiple brands (Apple, the BBC, the City of Liverpool and Pretty Green) all coalesced around a single, shared brand meta-narrative, that of the Beatles and the 50th anniversary of the *Sgt. Pepper's* release. The Beatles, via Apple, self-evidently provided the core product and indeed the core brand narrative, chiefly the *Sgt. Pepper* album. The BBC provided a correlated media artefact in the documentary, which served to not only boost its own audience viewing numbers and critical acclaim, but also told the literal and brand narrative of the album, reaffirming the core Beatle brand story. For the City of Liverpool, for whom Beatles tourism generates an estimated £82 million annually (Jones and Yates, 2016), the critical importance of the ongoing and regular re-affirmation of the connection between Liverpool and the Beatles to the local tourism economy, cannot be overstated. And for Pretty Green, affiliation with the most iconic band and album in British pop music history is no less significant. The clothing line itself, highly stylised and often psychedelically coloured and patterned, not to mention rather expensive, is unlikely to be a big seller. However, the benefits of the opportunity to stitch the Pretty Green brand narrative to that of the Beatles narrative are substantial.

Image 2: The Beatles clothing line on display at Pretty Green, Glasgow, August, 2017



Source: Tessler (2017)

This multi-faceted deployment of a single brand meta-narrative forms the basis for what I have termed the Immersive Economy. Extending the theory of the experience economy a step further, the Immersive Economy is, like its antecedent, driven by consumer experience. But where the experience economy focuses on the quality of the consumer experience, the Immersive Economy additionally affords consideration of the ways in which multiple, complementary brands can temporarily work together in the creation of a brand meta-narrative. For the consumer, there is the opportunity for not just one brand experience, but for several distinct yet interrelated brand experiences. For instance, imagine a single Beatles fan. That fan may wish to travel to Liverpool to celebrate his fandom by taking a guided tour of the Beatles' Liverpool. He may download a BBC documentary on the Beatles to his mobile device for the journey. Once in the city, he may opt to shop at the Liverpool Pretty Green store, purchasing a Beatles-branded article of clothing. In this way, a single consumer, driven by a single resonant brand meta-narrative ('The Beatles') engages with different elements of the brand story in each different experience. And in doing so, he engages not only with the overarching brand narrative, but also with each of the individual component brand narrative strands, i.e., Pretty Green, the City of Liverpool and the BBC.

Whilst of course this kind of shared brand affiliation is not unique, for brand meta-narratives, the level of both shared and acquired cultural capital between brands is exceptional. Moreover, the brand, as experienced by the consumer, is also unique in its scope and variety of ways in which he can engage with it. At the top of the global brand scale there will be similar examples of brand meta-narratives and Immersive Economies, for example, Star Wars or Coachella. But more than just canny merchandising, sponsorship or licensing deals, the Immersive Economy only exists when both partners contribute to the brand meta-narrative. In the Immersive Economy of the Beatles, Pretty Green, Liverpool and the BBC all benefit from their affiliation with the group and its brand. Yet the Beatles also benefit not only financially, but also culturally, as the brand events celebrating the *Sgt. Pepper's* 50th anniversary re-affirm the band's importance to popular music and popular culture and indeed introduce it to new generations of young music consumers through relevant contemporary media, platforms and channels.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to demonstrate the increasing centrality of popular music, musicians and music products to the creative industries. Drawing on the example of Urban Outfitters, I made the case that retail curation of popular music is central to the brand narrative, which focuses not on sales of a specific product type, but instead around a selection of products which inform the Urban Outfitters lifestyle. Through this discussion, I concluded that the processes of lifestyle branding make manifest Jenkins' theory of Cultural Convergence. Yet as evidenced by the Pretty Green case study, cultural convergence can only account for a portion of contemporary consumer behaviour, as argued by Pine and Gilmore, shoppers are increasingly motivated by brand experiences rather than brand lifestyles. Indeed, through Liam Gallagher's overt association with the Pretty Green brand, the clothes, the shops and the events the company promotes all work in tandem to create not just a brand experience, but a brand experience based upon a *hybridity*: for instance, shopping-gigs and fashion-music events amongst them. Yet I argued that like the notion of Cultural Convergence, the Experience Economy alone is insufficient for understanding not only how consumers experience brands, but how individual brands are increasingly working in partnership to form what I have termed brand meta-narratives, where a single over-arching brand story, in this instance, that of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* 50th anniversary release, drives multiple, affiliated yet distinct brand experiences. Each individual brand experience coalesces around and is dependent upon the larger brand meta-narrative, and the consumer's experiences of the meta-brand are bound together in what I am calling an Immersive Economy. The key requisites of the Immersive Economy are for a series of individual brands to work collectively to tell different stories within the brand meta-narrative. Each of these brand stories can be understood as related to, yet distinct from those of its partners. It is like the turning of a kaleidoscope: the pieces are still the same, yet the picture changes with each new turn. Thus it is the same in the Immersive Economy. Consumers are at the heart of branding activity. But my argument is that the space between various sectors of the creative industries is shrinking. As such, it is becoming increasingly vital to understand that consumers no longer view popular culture in segments but as part and parcel of their daily lives, embedded in every facet of their existence. Accordingly, the shift towards hybridity- and experientially-driven cultural products are logically affording more opportunity for innovation and collaboration between firms and brands once seen to be in discrete sectors. The convergence of hybridity and experience fuel the creation of brand meta-narratives, which in turn drive the emergent Immersive Economy.

5. References

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